
MORE QUARRIES FROM LAST CHANCE GULCH

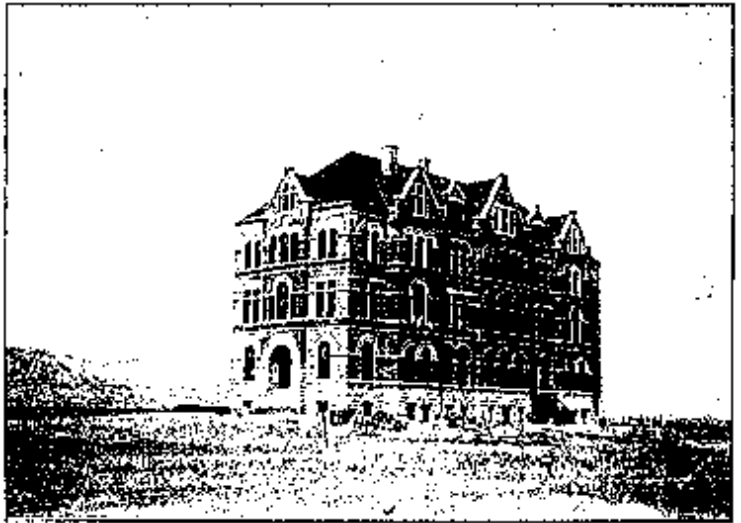
Despite almost-haunted reputation, Van Orsdel site has grand history

Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!—Well, perhaps these images are not the exact ones that come to mind when describing the Van Orsdel Memorial building, which sets alongside Martin's IGA in the Helena alley.

Perhaps the more appropriate images associated with the hollow brick shell that stands guard near the corner of Montana Avenue and Sierra Road East are those conjured up by the thousands of grade school students who have passed the vacant Van Orsdel Memorial building every morning for years on their way to class at Rossiter Elementary School—Bats and Spiders and Owls and, yes, even a Ghost or Goblin or two.

Yet despite its almost-haunted reputation, the Van Orsdel building, constructed between 1921 and 1935, and the site upon which it sets, retain a grand and colorful history that includes not only one of Montana's first universities, which will be discussed in this first article of a two-part series, but also a boarding school and receiving home for unwanted children. The building is a lasting tribute to one of the premier religious leaders of territorial Montana, the Reverend William Wesley Van Orsdel, and to the efforts of early-day Montana Methodism in the Helena area.

"Brother Van," as the Reverend Van Orsdel was known to his many parishioners and admirers, arrived in Montana during the summer 1872. Within a year, his circuit-riding ministry had taken him around the Montana territory and to Helena, where he spent the winter of 1873. Not soon after his first year preaching in the state, Brother Van's interest in and commitment to public service institutions,



Mt. Wesleyan University, 1890. (Photos courtesy of the Montana Historical Society.)

such as churches, schools, and hospitals became widely known.

Between the date of his arrival in 1872 and his death in 1919, Brother Van was instrumental in establishing more than 100 churches and parsonages and several hospitals throughout Montana, as well as the Montana Wesleyan University and the Montana Deaconess School for Children, both of which occupied this site in the Helena valley.

The concept of establishing a Methodist university in Montana first surfaced at the 1877 Montana Conference of the Methodist Church in Bozeman. Brother Van and then-Governor B.F. Potts, in addition to several other members of the conference's Commission on Education, resolved to take the appropriate measures necessary to establish a Methodist school at a central location within the territory. That location was found five miles outside of Helena in the Prickly Pear Valley.

In 1888, the Methodist Church authorized the establishment of the "Montana University," the name of which was changed to "Montana Wesleyan University" the following year. In 1889, a 3 1/2 story brick administration building was built for \$50,000 on the 205-acre site. The building, which was occupied by 40 students, housed dormitory rooms, a dining room, offices, classrooms, reception rooms, and recitation rooms. It also offered the most modern of conveniences, including both hot and cold running water. Tuition ranged from \$12-\$18 per term in 1895, while board, room, lights, and heat averaged about \$6.50 per week.

Students were subject to strict regimentation during the school year, including uniforms for all students and daily military drilling for the boys. Yet social activities were not lacking; in the mid-1890's, the school fielded a college bicycle club for its female students and Helena's first football team for its male students.



Brother Van.

The school, despite a financial crisis during the depression of 1893, prospered in the waning years of the century. The personal sacrifices and persistent fund-raising of the Methodist church, Reverend Van Orsdel and the students of Montana Wesleyan kept the institution alive.

However, when the electric streetcar line that connected the university to Helena proper was discontinued in 1898, university trustees decided to move the school to a more modern and practical location in Helena.

The valley campus was vacated in 1899, and Montana Wesleyan University moved into town, occupying two buildings: "College Hall" located on the southeast corner of Warren Street and Helena Avenue, and the first "Mills Hall" located at 643-649 North Ewing Street; both of these buildings still stand today. The university consolidated

with several other religious institutions between 1923 and 1947, finally merging with colleges sponsored by the Congregational Christian and Presbyterian churches to form the present Rocky Mountain College in Billings.

As for the stately brick administration building on the valley campus, it remained vacant, and over ten years of neglect left the site in a dilapidated state. Brother Van was truly discouraged by the deteriorated conditions of the campus when he visited it in 1906. Nevertheless, as a visionary, Brother Van saw great potential in the property, fourteen acres of which he leased during that year, refurbishing the grounds and the administration building with a great deal of his own money into a boarding school and sanctuary for children.

The "Deaconess Preparatory School" had been born, ushering in a new era for the valley campus, which would include the later construction of the Van Orsdel Memorial building, as well as a new venture for Brother Van Orsdel and Montana Methodists, through which they could again generously serve the citizens of Montana.

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